

The state of the African state

The past, present and future of the nation state in Africa



RICHARD DOWDEN

Director, Royal African Society

Generalisations about the nation states of Africa are becoming increasingly difficult to make. Even if restricted to sub-Saharan African countries, without the Maghreb states, few statements apply to all countries. South Africa, Botswana and Somalia are exceptions to almost every generalisation. Each African country is extraordinarily different – perhaps the strongest indication that, after 50 years of independence, African states have created distinct national characteristics. There is diversity too in the ways states function. Despite western economic and political pressure for uniform western concepts of democracy, law and economic management, African governments are finding their own ways of managing statehood.

Legacy of colonialism

It is tempting to speculate on what shape African states might have taken had the Europeans resisted the temptation to take over the continent in the late 19th century. Even more tempting is to speculate on the political systems that would have evolved from Africa's subtle systems of power and monarchy. However the

brutal but brief conquest of Africa, particularly south of the Sahara, left Africa somehow stranded between tradition and western modernity, its old leadership and confidence in its own ways undermined but without consensus on what should replace it.

Most African states were formed from the toe-holds that European traders had secured on the coasts of the continent over almost four centuries. When European rulers suddenly decided to take over Africa, they carved it up by drawing lines on the blank map in order to avoid war with each other in the vastness of the

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African interior. In some areas they had not even set foot on the ground where the lines were drawn. Ethnic groups, local identities and even natural borders such as rivers and mountains, were ignored as the map-makers guessed where watersheds lay between river sources. The imperial powers then moved in, but only slowly established their administration in areas that were not of immediate economic importance. While some African peoples were almost wiped out by the arrival of imperial troops and their colonists, others were barely aware of the arrival – or the

departure – of the Europeans. Barely 80 years later, the European rulers left and their casually-created entities were pitched onto the international stage as nation states.

Beneath the surface African societies remained strong. But these ancient societies were boxed up artificially in states that included several ethnicities, divisions that were easily exploited by power hungry politicians. Nigeria for example has some 250 different languages and three huge ethnic groups which competed fiercely for power in the lead up to independence and have continued to do so ever since. Imagine Europe, which also contains three heavyweight groups but a mere 25 official languages, electing one president and one centralised government. These new states also contained the remnants of leadership from pre-colonial states; kings, emirs and chiefs whose power may have been eroded or discredited by colonial rule but who still exercised considerable influence at local level.

At first sight the phenomenon of different ethnic groups squeezed into artificial countries offers a reasonable explanation for why African states are weak and rootless. Their flags, anthems, currencies, border posts, bureaucracies, armies, airlines, even their names were handed over to the new leaders by the departing French and British rulers. The only apparent reality of each country is the lines drawn on a map by foreigners. But African nation states generate considerable nationalism. From the Biafran war, fought to hold Nigeria together, to the present fragmentation of the Congo there have been few secessionist movements and none founded on the idea of reuniting an ethnic group parted by a border. Nor do the borders explain why pre-colonial African states that continued throughout the imperial period – such as Ethiopia and Liberia – suffered the same ethnic tensions and weaknesses as all the others. Those that argue that the causes of Africa's problems lie in the lines on the map that cut across ethnic groups also have to explain

why two states that are most clearly based on single ethnicity, Somalia and Rwanda, have experienced the most violent conflicts of all.

Post-independence trajectory

The struggle for independence was waged primarily on a nationalistic level. Ethnic movements that tried to claim national independence outside the colonial framework or claimed autonomy or special rights in the new states were quickly crushed. Pan Africanism remained a dream for the new African leaders but they made sure it did not affect local political realities. The continent-wide body, the Organisation of African Unity, affirmed that borders were sacrosanct. Boundaries were not going to be redrawn to fit African realities. Intervention by neighbours – even to help oppressed fellow Africans – was outlawed. No one supported President Julius Nyerere when he sent the Tanzanian army into Uganda to overthrow Idi Amin.

With few exceptions the new leaders of Africa saw their first task as shoring up national unity by establishing one party states and outlawing the opposition. On the surface ethnic difference was a prohibited subject. Tribalism was the enemy of nationhood. In secret the prime political task of every African leader was to manipulate the ethnic balance in the government or crush his rival ethnic group.

Many leaders also believed that political independence should be followed by economic independence. Backed by the World Bank in many cases, they nationalised key industries, established new ones and created marketing boards to become economically self sufficient and establish state control over the means of production and distribution. For the first 30 years after independence most African countries, whether free market or socialist, were one party states with a huge panoply of state political and economic institutions.

But at the head of each government was the 'Father of the Nation' whose word was law

and in many cases whose bank account was the national treasury. The one party – one man – state was often a one General state. It destroyed the ethic of a national civil service by not allowing a national professional middle class to emerge committed to the national interest. Loyalty was to the leader not the country. Governance was about power, grabbing it and keeping it. The civil service was merely a tool in this. So, relatives and loyalists from the President's ethnic group were posted and promoted and in turn brought their own people into office.

By the late 1970s in no African country, with the possible exception of Botswana, did government deliver anything of value to its citizens. The only winners were the President's people. Elsewhere the state was simply crumbling away like an old colonial edifice that had fallen into desuetude. The image that best sums up the early years of independence is of a house in the rain, brilliantly portrayed by Chinua Achebe in his novel, *A Man of the People*: 'We had all been in the rain together until yesterday. Then a handful of us – the smart, and the lucky and hardly ever the best – had scrambled for the one shelter our former rulers left, and had taken it over and barricaded themselves in.' The elites who took over at independence seized the instruments and symbols of power from the departing imperial powers. But the process of democratisation was stopped dead.

Congo/Zaire was probably the worst example of the disintegrated state in which all officials, from ministers to civil servants, looted what they could by forcing bribes from people. Attended by a few soldiers and a secretary, ministers went to their office only to collect bribes from those seeking contracts, permits or exemptions. Civil servants were never paid but extracted payment from those people seeking to meet the minister. Outside in the streets policemen watched for minor infringements of the law to collect more bribes. At the country's head was Mobutu

Sese Seko, the greatest bribe taker of them all, who treated the country much like its founder King Leopold of Belgium: a private estate that he owned outright. In terms of statehood, the country was no more than a Congo-shaped blank on the map.

Congo was an extreme example of a typical African state. Their governments manipulated the fixed exchange rates so that the urban elite could survive while the rest of the country sank into economic torpor. In Nigeria, Kenya, Angola, Congo Brazzaville, Liberia and Sierra Leone the rulers literally stole the country.

The departed European powers made little fuss about this theft or about democracy, human rights or the state-controlled economic policies in the new sovereign states. They only objected when their nationals' assets were nationalised. This was the time of the Cold War and fundamental principles of democracy and freedom of speech took second place on the western agenda to the issue of whose side you were on: Moscow or Washington. Most African rulers stayed in power by allying themselves with one side or the other but some successfully played them off against each other or floated cleverly between the two. Others, like Siad Barre in Somalia and Jerry Rawlings in Ghana, changed sides and survived.

Africa and the end of the Cold War

With the end of the Cold War western donors were freed from the need to prop up African dictators and aid was switched to Eastern Europe. Meanwhile the old rulers were dying off and a new generation was emerging in Africa that demanded the same freedoms as the West enjoyed and which were now spreading to former Communist countries. The West's new agenda for Africa was democracy, human rights and the establishment of the free market. Western aid donors regarded the corrupt top-heavy state-controlled economies of Africa as the problem. They

gave their money instead to non-state actors, international and local NGOs, by-passing the bureaucracy and corruption of governments in an attempt to get aid directly to the people. As a result, from the mid-1980s African governments were starved of funds and deliberately impoverished.

Multi-party elections, also forced on one-party states, meant African rulers had to promise the electorate a much better life but, at the same time, the people were suffering savage cut backs in their standard of living. Structural Adjustment Programmes dismantled the institutions and structures that had previously been built with World Bank and donor money. Public expenditure had to be cut, state assets privatised and currencies floated. State employees, often supporting large extended families, were laid off and those that remained were rapidly impoverished by their collapsing currencies. Scores of trained people like civil servants and teachers, who, with the right political leadership, could have run and developed Africa, were reduced to moonlighting as taxi drivers or street sellers.

The Washington Consensus economists believed that if government bureaucracy was cut out, economic activity would increase and the state could benefit from more taxes. But the theoreticians in the IMF and World Bank never looked at the realities of Africa, or perhaps refused to see them. These countries no longer functioned as states. Classic economic behaviour only happens in states where there is law, a public service and infrastructure in place to enable economic take-off. Even if economies improved by one or two percentage points there was no civil service left with the capacity to collect taxes on behalf of the state.

Unsurprisingly many of these countries suffered rebellions and war. In the late 1980s

almost 20 countries were riven by conflict and there were fears that these states would simply disappear. In the civil wars of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Angola and Congo, rulers and rebels had become like competing warlords, seizing as much of the economy as they could to further their war aims. Neither side could boast legitimacy; governments did not deliver to their people. In most of these places the government controlled only the capital but the civil service had ceased to function. Rebels on the other hand were happy to leave the care of the people and other state functions to the United Nations agencies and NGOs. As long as their fighters had food, shelter and women, they had little

interest in the rest of the population. Whatever the motive for starting the war, the pursuit of resources – diamonds and other minerals and timber – sometimes became an end in itself.

Throughout this second post-independence period, which lasted from the mid

1980s to the late 1990s, Africa suffered drastic economic decline. People began to ask whether the state could survive in Africa. Debt mounted, the capacity to produce growth diminished. Outsiders like Robert Kaplan saw Africa as 'The Coming Anarchy' or more simply – as the Economist said – 'The Hopeless Continent'.

The future of the African state

We are now entering a third stage of the post-independence state in Africa. Internal and external pressure has made most African governments hold elections. More important, there is a plethora of radio stations and newspapers in most African countries. Mobile phones have enabled far greater communication within countries, even prompting some to ask if the Rwandan genocide would have been possible had there been mobile phones

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at that time. Today most of the wars have diminished or stopped – thanks in part to greater international intervention and peace making. The guilt of failure in Rwanda during the genocide of 1994 has meant western governments can no longer walk away from Africa.

The outside world has turned its attention back to governments. The donors' love affair with NGOs, or 'civil society' as it is now called, has not ended but there is a realisation that if nation states are to develop, they must have effective governments. Increasingly western donors are pushing African governments to reform their institutions and establish transparency and accountability in governance. Funding has been transferred from projects back to direct budget support for governments. A new programme, NEPAD, has been agreed between African heads of government and western donors which in theory commits African governments to principles of democracy, respect for human rights and free market economic policies. In return, western governments will give more support, cancel debt and address some of the trade barriers to Africa's development. None of the elements of NEPAD are new but together they represent a formalised new deal between Africa and the rest of the world.

But there is a dangerous assumption, common in Washington and London, that Africa's problems have been caused by bad policies in the past and that if the 'right' policies can be discovered all will be well. History and African culture – Africa's way of doing things – are ignored. Solutions to Africa's problems may look as if they are working for a while but, in the long term, deeper solutions can only come from within Africa. For example, an election – the end point for western peace-making strategy in Africa – may not be the best long term solution to a deep seated rivalry that has become ethnically based. In Africa, multi-party elections and a winner takes all political system encourages the polarisation

of ethnic or religious politics. It also gives the election to those who have the resources to manipulate the process, not necessarily those with the support of the people.

Africa and in particular African rulers, are exceedingly good at understanding and adapting to outside pressures. Given a new hymn sheet by donors, they soon learn the words and sing with gusto. Whether the promises will be fulfilled is another matter. Jean Francois Bayart, a French academic, went as far as to suggest that in the struggle between African rulers and the outside world, the African rulers have the upper hand. He also invented the phrase, the rhizome state – the concept of the real strength of an organism existing invisibly, below ground. In the end, power in Africa derives not from outside support but from within, from old networks and pre-colonial power systems that lie beneath the surface of modern African states. African leaders may be clever at capturing the goodies that western donors might offer but in the end they are bound by the internal politics of their own countries. Unless outsiders understand the importance of these networks and perceive the underlying internal dynamics of African politics, they are in grave danger of being misled by their own dreams for the continent – like so many of their predecessors who tried to save Africa.

The future of the state in Africa will depend on two very different factors: identity and HIV / AIDS. Can the nationals of each African country forge a common idea of what it means to be Nigerian or Angolan, Ugandan or Malian? In too many cases the different is perceived as alien, tolerated as such but never allowed full rights as a citizen. Divided countries like Cote d'Ivoire, where Muslim northerners are unequal citizens, or Congo, where the Banyamulenge in the east are refused citizenship, cannot be reunited until these issues are resolved. One solution is a stronger, more national civil service in which ability counts for more than ethnicity and which serves all

regions equally.

The other is devolution. In three of Africa's biggest states titanic struggles involving ethnicity or religion or both are currently being fought between the central government and a region or regions. Nigeria, Congo and Sudan will never be united single states again but may survive as confederacies. Their central governments still resist devolution despite years of rebellion and war – nearly 50 years in the case of Sudan. They fear that devolution will lead to break-up, but their violent resistance to it will almost certainly cause it.

The African state is also under threat from AIDS. HIV infection rates are reaching one in three or worse among some groups. African institutions are already weak and if these figures turn into the equivalent numbers of early deaths, African civil services, armies, schools, universities and medical services will be unable to cope. President Festus Mogae of Botswana has said that his country, the best run in Africa, may not survive the AIDS pandemic. Unless there is huge and rapid intervention to provide anti-retroviral

drugs to key workers in governments, that may be true of several other African countries too.

If anything is to be learnt from a historical examination of African politics, it is that outsiders involvement in the affairs of African states are often misguided. However, it is clear that we are now living in an increasingly inter-connected world where international partnerships are required to tackle new problems. These partnerships need to be genuine – and be informed by a good understanding of Africa's history, culture and context – if the international community is to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past ■

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